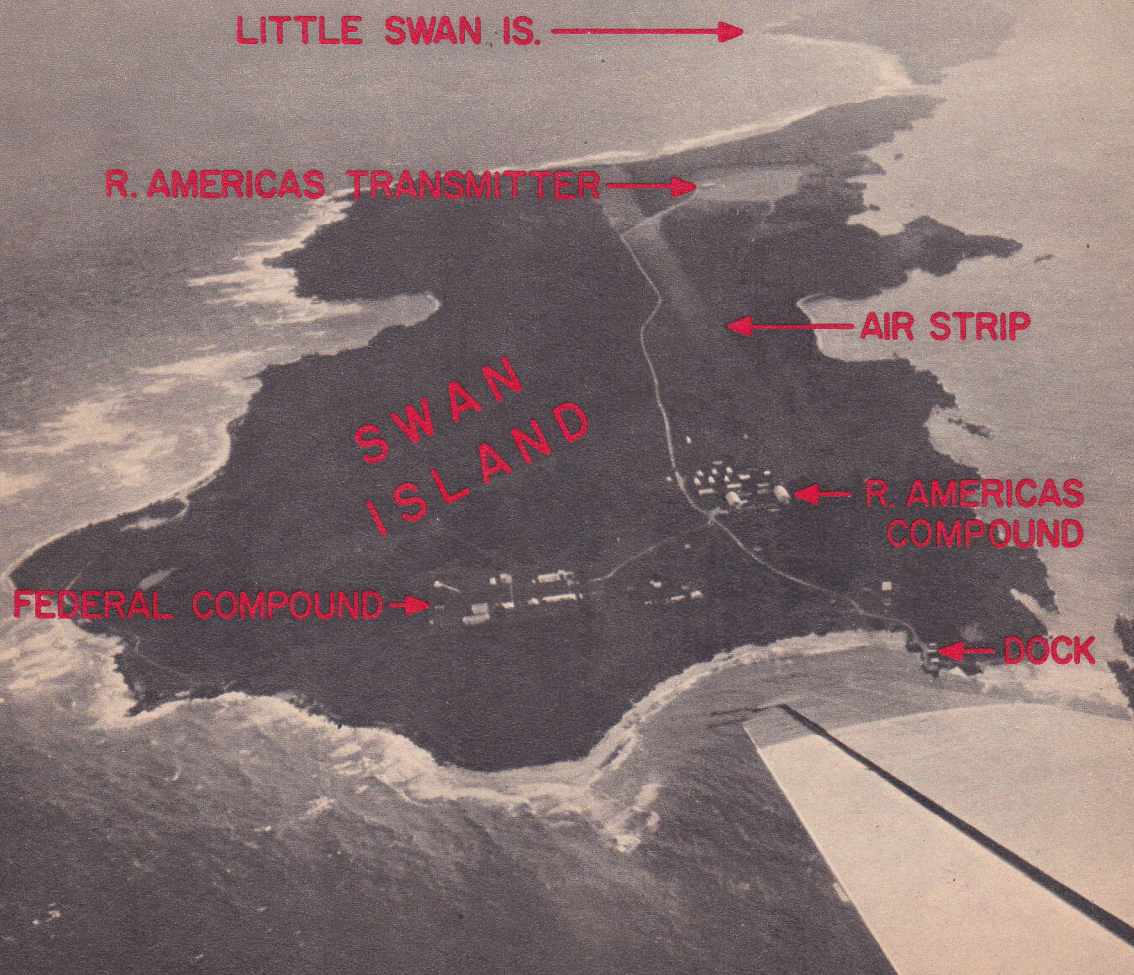


El Visits Radio Americas

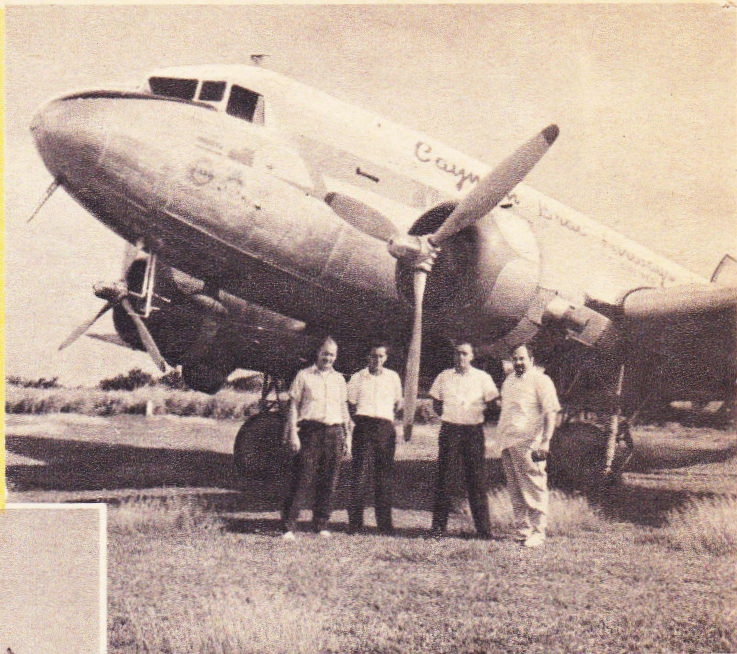
By TOM KNEITEL, K2AES/KS4CH

A SHORT history of the radio waves covering the last several years would have to include an awful lot of downright boring incidents and little controversy, the latter perhaps being highlighted by ruckuses involving the ownership of a certain station in Austin, Tex., the hullabaloo about international broadcasters shouldering hams around in the 40-meter band . . . and the strange assortment of facts and fantasies surrounding the Caribbean broadcasting station calling itself Radio Americas.

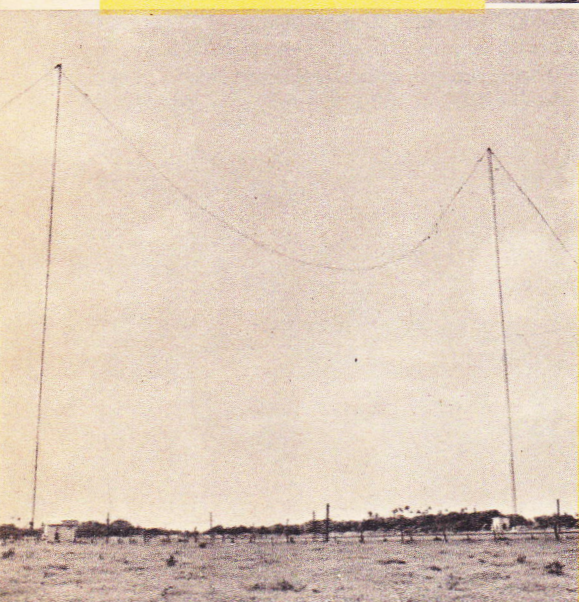
Way back in 1961, when the station was known as Radio Swan and sent what appeared to be coded messages ("the moon is red") during the Bay of Pigs invasion, charges that it was a secret operation of the Central Intelligence Agency were made in the press. Then secondary complications arose when respected members of the DX fraternity began doubting that the station was located where it said it was—namely on Swan Island, a lonesome little pinpoint 125 mi. north of the Honduran coast and 185 mi. southwest of Grand Cayman Island. As the years went by there were more and more DXers who seemed bent on uprooting Radio Americas and moving it to such varied Caribbean islands as Navassa and Cozumel, to Venezuela or



El Visits Radio Americas



Members of expedition with chartered DC-3 on grass landing strip at Swan (left to right): EI editor Bob Beason, pilot Francisco Hernandez, copilot Ricardo Madrigal, author Tom Kneitel. Pilot made good landing despite primitive strip and crosswind.



Radio Americas broadcast-band antennas radiate a signal on 1157 kc. Tuning shack is at base of the left (eastern) tower, which gets more power than the other one, producing a directional signal pattern. This cleared area is carpeted with rich grass. Normal scrub jungle vegetation is seen in background.

even aboard a ship or aircraft. The hot speculation about the real location of the station continued long after the question of whether it was a CIA operation seemed to be settled to everybody's satisfaction—in the affirmative.

When it bothered to comment at all, the management of R. Americas maintained that it knew where its station was—and that it was on Swan. But such statements seemed only to confirm the suspicion that R. Americas *must* be somewhere else.

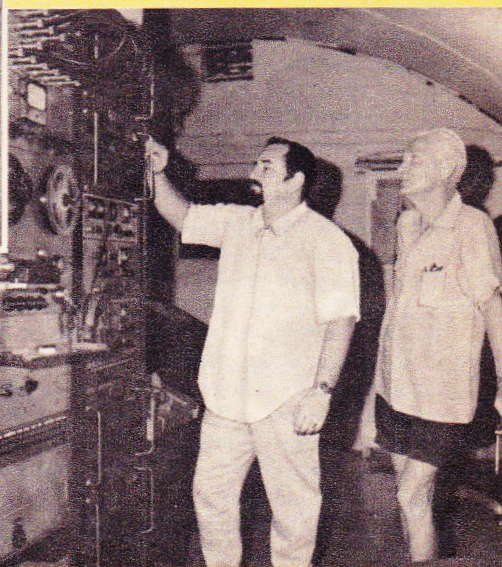
It was a hopeless puzzle that could not be solved with accuracy because almost nobody

seemed ever to have been to Swan, except for those few people who belonged there. Rumor had it that the island was off limits to anybody not actually working for or authorized by the government or one of its contractors. So far as anyone could determine, the only outsiders to see Swan in recent years were an elderly couple from New England who went there to count birds.

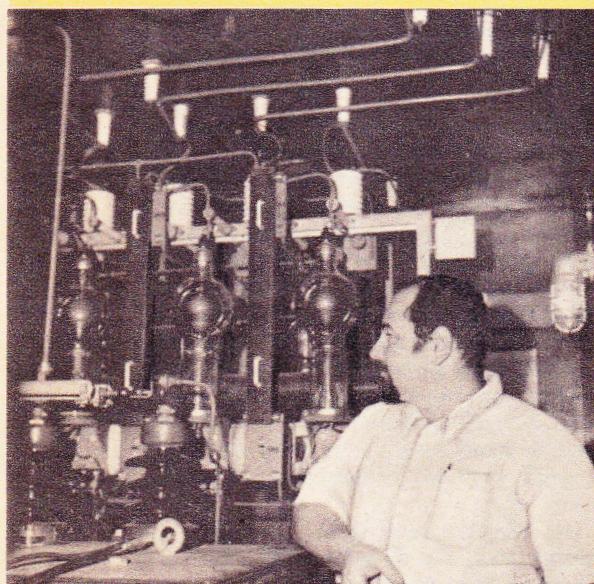
In view of all this, EI's editors decided that a small DXpedition to Swan Island would be sportingly difficult to pull off but just the thing to solve the controversy. Those chosen to go were EI editor Bob Beason and



The author makes like an announcer in the 1-desk, 2-position Radio Americas booth. News and some station IDs are done live but most programs are taped. RA's announcers weren't seen on visit.



Station manager Paul Collamore with the author at one end of quonset hut containing studio, news room, and receiving-taping facilities shown here. Some programs are picked up, taped, rebroadcast.



Six-tube final stage of RA broadcast transmitter (left) is of ancient design. A seventh tube is used as standby. Signal comes through immense filter in foreground, exits via lines overhead.

the writer of this article.

Swan is a mile-and-three-quarter speck of coral overrun with tropical vegetation, except for clearings, that is almost as remote as the Mountains of the Moon. Its ownership long has been disputed by the United States and Honduras, though for the last century the U.S. has counted it as a possession. The island once was the site of a thriving, though small, coconut and guano (bird droppings) exporting industry. In 1912 the United Fruit Co. established a powerful wireless relay station there, erecting four giant transmitting towers at the west end of the island. The sta-

tion was abandoned 20 years later and in the late 1930s the U.S. Government sent Weather Bureau and Civil Aeronautics Administration (now FAA) personnel to Swan to establish a weather and aeronautical radio station. In 1955 Swan was levelled by a hurricane but was rebuilt and still is the site of Weather Bureau and FAA operations.

Wildlife on Swan includes large numbers of iguanas (a fearsome looking but harmless lizard), booby birds and man-of-war (frigate) birds. Vegetation, though heavy and thick, is commonplace with the exception of some manchineel trees, which can give the

El Visits Radio Americas

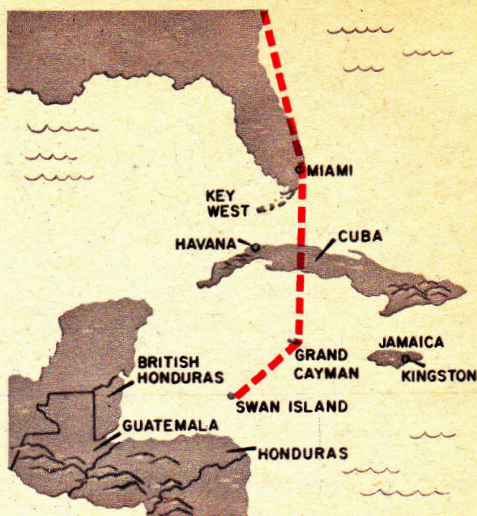
unwary a nasty sting. Waters surrounding Swan abound with fish, including amberjack, barracuda, snappers and queenfish (queenfish look like large barracudas and are known to local sportsmen as wahoos). Curiously enough, there are no swans on Swan. The name is taken from its discoverer, a Captain Swann, master of the vessel *Cygnet*, which landed there in 1680.

At present the island is home to about 40 souls, Americans, Cayman Islanders and Hondurans. The leading question for us was how many of these souls (if any) labored on behalf of Radio Americas? There was always the possibility that the station really wasn't there. Maybe it was floating or flying around, or possibly it was in South America. The station's shortwave transmitter (which was off the air for a year) had recently reappeared on 6 mc and started giving a Venezuelan mailing address. (The broadcast station, which lists itself as being on 1160 kc but actually is centered on 1157 kc, continued to use a Miami address.)

The EI DXpedition then hinged on our figuring out a way to get to Swan to peer through the palms for a first-person survey of the situation. EI had written so much about the station that the publication undoubtedly had become a headache to the staff. Nevertheless, we set out to hook ourselves an invitation to the exclusive island.

Figuring that the most obvious start would be to come right out and ask the RA office in Miami whether we could visit Swan, we fired off a letter. To our amazement, RA director Bob Wilkinson came back with the answer that we would be welcome on Swan so long as we had permission from the FAA (which, he said, controls the island). In addition, we would have to provide our own transportation since no regularly scheduled planes or ships have Swan on their itinerary. We envisioned miles of red tape to get FAA approval.

As things turned out, the FAA was the least of our problems. Gus Atkins, chief of the FAA's Airways Facilities Branch in the Miami region, gave us his approval and his position with the FAA makes him, in effect, manager of Swan, the whole of which is federally owned. He had been one of the government employees on Swan 25 years ago.



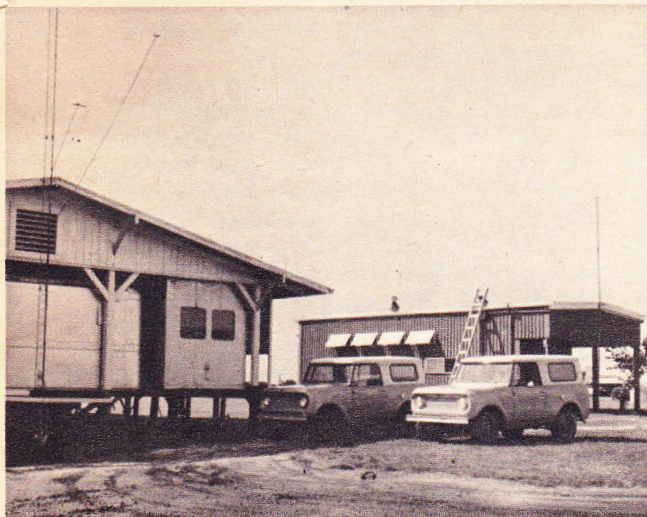
The route taken by EI's adventurers from New York. Commercial airlines run to Cayman; local airline chartered DXpedition DC-3 to Swan Island.

He even asked us to stop by his office on our way through Miami, which we did.

I wanted to get a ham license for Swan and so I applied for a 60-day authorization from the FCC. I waited and waited and nothing happened so I called a friend who works in the license-issuing end. He checked up and found that Swan licenses were issued so rarely that the computer was not programmed for KS4 calls and evidently lost its breakfast or something when given the request. Eventually the license (KS4CH) was issued by hand but for four years rather than 60 days. (I didn't bother asking the FCC why.)

The biggest problem was arranging for transportation. To fly by private plane from Miami or Key West was impractical since we would have to skirt around the west end of Cuba, stop for refueling at Mexico's Cozumel Island, then continue to Swan. This was long, complicated and tedious. Going by ship also was a major undertaking since it meant searching out a barnacle-covered island hopper and somehow getting the captain to wait for us while we poked around the island.

Eventually we decided to charter a DC-3 airliner from Cayman Brac Airlines. This is a Costa Rican outfit which runs an air service in the British colony of the Cayman Islands, just south of Cuba. The line had no flights on Wednesday and the DC-3 would be availa-



Transmitter building (left) is made up of trucks under roof. Power station is in the background.



Blue pennant sometimes sent by R. Americas with QSL cards. Broadcast frequency actually is 1157.

ble. The way it worked out, we had to be at Owen Roberts Field on Grand Cayman at 7 o'clock on Wednesday morning for our charter flight to Swan. In order to get to Grand Cayman on time we left New York on Monday morning to fly to Miami. Monday afternoon was spent with Gus Atkins, who briefed us on some of the colorful history of Swan Island. Monday evening we met with some ex-Radio Americas employees who wanted to bet (with two-to-one odds) that a big, clumsy DC-3 would never be able to land on the short and rocky Swan strip, which was designed for nothing larger than a twin Beech. That was not exactly encouraging news.

On Tuesday morning we departed from Miami on a British West Indian Airways jet for the 55-minute hop over Cuba to Grand Cayman. Grand Cayman is a picturesque tropical paradise, quite colonial, quite British and as yet almost undiscovered by American tourists. It's what Nassau and Bermuda were like years ago before being overrun by bands of visitors. Its coastline is dotted with ancient forts, castles, shipwrecks, secluded beaches and fishing shacks. Several luxury hotels are now being opened in expectation of future tourist trade from the States and Canada. So its days as a secluded paradise are numbered.

One thing that impressed us during our day

and night on Cayman was the effect that the words *Swan Island* had on local Caymanians (pronounced ka-MON-ians). A few of these people have done work hitches on Swan but most of them have never been to the island and know little about it, except for the rumors all of them have heard. Almost every time we mentioned our destination we were given a look of disbelieving shock and awe.

[Continued overleaf]



Swan version of Playboy Club is in federal section. It might have live iguanas but only paper bunnies.

One taxi driver simply whistled. Two people asked us point-blank whether we worked for the CIA. Our reply, in the best CIA tradition, was to say no. (Actually, we thought later, we should have said, "The CIA—what's that?" but we were new at the 007 game.)

This general air of suspicion and seeming fear gave us the creeps in short order, though at the same time it was on the funny side and reminded us of one of those ancient horror movies where people in rented peasant suits listen intently while the landlord urges the clipped-mustache English traveler not to continue his journey after sundown.

"I beg of you," says the baron of the joint, "for your own safety, go back!"

"But I must get to Count Dracula's Castle," says the mustache, not getting the idea.

All the peasants pop their eyes wide and cross themselves like mad while the landlord yells, "Zvot nanhj haryostvl, szjtarch-vuhlj!" What he's saying, of course, in Lower Transylvanian is, "Man, you outta you cotton-pickin' mind?"

Tuesday night on Grand Cayman we took bearings on RA's short-wave and broadcast signals with a receiver loaned to the expedition by Lafayette Radio. Both signals appeared to be coming from the direction of Swan.

Wednesday morning when we got to the field we were met by Frank Roulstone, Jr., a lanky American originally from Tampa who runs the U.S. Weather Bureau station on Grand Cayman. Frank had heard of our trip (by that time, it seemed, *everybody* on the island knew about it) and wanted to go with us to visit his Weather Bureau buddies on Swan. In Frank's 13 years on Cayman he never had been to the island. Inasmuch as our DC-3 had room for 32 passengers we bundled him aboard with us and took off to the southwest toward Swan.

The flight over shark-infested Caribbean waters in our 1938ish twin-engine airliner was uneventful but somewhat longer than any of us would have preferred. The FAA facility on Swan includes a non-directional, low-frequency (407 kc) homing radio beacon with so much moxie it can be picked up all over the Caribbean. Our Puerto Rican crew, made up of pilot Francisco Hernandez and copilot Ricardo Madrigal, homed in on the beacon but we flew through a cold front and the clouds first were thick and then broken and it impressed the heck out of us when suddenly this dot of an island appeared ex-

actly in front of our nose, then was lost again to sight through the clouds.

When we emerged at a much lower altitude Swan looked larger than we had thought it was going to be. Our pilot made two recon runs around Swan and Little Swan, a football-field-size, uninhabited islet lying at the eastern tip of the main island. The striking thing about the main blob of land was its antenna farm. Tall radio towers sprouted all over the place. Here and there were clusters of quonset huts, concrete buildings, some wooden houses and a few white coral roads.

We also were impressed with the shortness of the landing strip and the fact it was neither concrete nor asphalt—just plain grass. The DC-3 swung in low from the west on final approach with a stiff crosswind blowing from the left. We crossed our fingers and gulped. What happened next was one of the all-time great landings any of us had seen. Francisco crabbed the plane sharply left, then straightened out at the last instant and touched down so softly on the grass that we couldn't feel the bump. Even our welcoming committee was impressed.

We taxied around and ended up back at the western end of the strip beside the buildings making up the Radio Americas compound. A light twin plane flies to Swan twice a week from Miami, bringing in supplies for the RA operation, but the sight of an airliner landing was so unusual that virtually the entire island population of 40 turned out to greet us, making us feel for the moment like celebrities.

We were welcomed to Swan by a smiling and shirtless group of Weather Bureau and FAA people and by RA's station manager, Paul Collamore. It quickly became apparent that if Radio Americas wasn't on Swan Island Collamore certainly had sold his Miami office a nifty bill of goods.

Radio Americas was there, all right, big and brassy and making no attempt to conceal itself. The transmitting site was at the southeastern end of the island and the living/recreation compound was at the southwestern side of the island and consisted of a cluster of quonset huts.

First stop on our inspection tour was the RA receiving shack and studio. The place was clattering away with radioteletype machines printing out Spanish language news from the wire services. Banks of communications receivers lined one wall, maps of Cuba and the Caribbean covered other walls.

Since most of the programs are sent from Miami on tape there is no need for an elaborate studio. As a result, the studio consists of a tiny room with one desk and a microphone. Live announcing is done by a two-man staff. For some reason unknown to us the announcers were about the only RA staff members we didn't meet or even see wandering around. Their dormitory was the only building not included in our otherwise comprehensive tour of the station. The announcers undoubtedly are Cubans and the long-range goal of the station assuredly is to work against Fidel Castro. However, RA always has maintained a facade as a commercial station selling products in the Caribbean. It could be that the sight of Cuban announcers might seem to conflict with this image—or maybe the men just slept all day.

Leaving the receiving shack, we drove to the eastern side of the island toward the transmitter site. Our vehicle was an International Harvester Scout which, despite the fact that its odometer read only 6,000 mi., was well beat from too many trips on the rocky Swan Island roads and too many gallops through the Swan jungle. It was a four-wheel-drive job and had to nudge Swan's cow population out of the center of the road.

Since the station isn't on the air during the day, we arrived at the transmitter while maintenance work was being performed by one of the transmitter operators.

The transmitter site is dominated by two 243-ft. towers which are used for the broadcast band. The eastern tower is favored, power-wise, by a ratio of better than two to one, producing a null in the signal pattern to the west and northwest and preventing interference with WJJD of Chicago and KSL of Salt Lake City, both 50,000-watt stations operating on 1160 kc.

A few hundred yards to the west of the broadcast towers are a series of smaller towers and reflectors used for the Radio Americas short-wave signal.

The transmitters themselves are housed in large trailer vans from which the wheels have been removed. The vans are close to each other, share a common roof and are joined by wooden walkways. The transmitting gear consists of a vintage 50,000-watt broadcast rig and a 5,000-watt short-wave unit which also has seen better days. Both transmitters were on standby with filaments lit.

Adjacent to the transmitter vans is a new-looking building housing two huge diesel

generators which supply all of the power for RA. Two diesel engineers are in attendance to keep these babies going (they also maintain the vehicles).

In all, there are six radio operators and engineers working there for RA, plus the two diesel men. The station also employs a crew of 10 Honduran and Caymanian workers to do heavy labor and the two announcers. Two of the laborers have wives and children living with them on the island.

The laborers live in a little community of wooden buildings called Gliddentown. It looks not unlike the small communities we found on Grand Cayman and even has its own church.

Paul Collamore told us that he and the other Americans working for RA actually were employed by Philco's Tech Rep Division, an organization which rents or leases engineers to private industry. As Philco employees, they did not have access to some of the information we sought on station policy and practices.

For instance, I wanted to know why the short-wave transmitter announces the Caracas address while the broadcast station requests that mail be sent to Miami. I was told that I would have to ask the Miami office. I had the same results with a question on why there was a need for short-wave transmissions when the station ostensibly was trying to cover only the Caribbean area and was doing a whiz-bang job with its 50-gallon broadcast-band rig.

(Miami eventually told me the Caracas address was announced so they could separate broadcast reception reports from those coming in from short-wave coverage. The short-wave transmitter was used, they said, to reach Central American and South American areas, where more people have SW receivers than broadcast sets, according to their figures.)

Of the Radio Americas men on Swan and whether they are employees of Philco, I would say I have no doubt that they are, and also no desire to challenge anybody on the subject. As a matter of fact, if one found some government agency—the CIA as a for-instance—that wanted to propagandize on the air, it would make a lot of sense to contract the project out to a commercial company. It also is normal procedure for government agencies.

[Continued on page 111]

Continued from page 51

This reminds me of one hilarious (to Beason and myself) incident in connection with that supposedly secret government organization. According to a lot of people who seem to know what they are talking about, including the authors of a book on the CIA, the Rolex wristwatch is supposed to be some kind of secret identification amulet for CIA agents. Rolexes are quite expensive and seldom seen but *two* of the half-dozen RA engineers we got close to were wearing them. That's quite an average for such a small population. Furthermore, I happened to be wearing one at the time and on two occasions I turned my head sharply and found the same chap staring intently at my watch.

Life on Swan Island can be quite attractive if you are not easily bored, want to stash away some money and don't mind a monastic life. The place is as quiet and removed from the cares of the workaday world as some Himalayan palace. There's no rush-hour traffic, no crime, no police, no TV, no door-to-door salesmen, no telephone company. There also are no women (except for the wives of two laborers). All Swan offers is plenty of good beaches, surf and deep-sea fishing, skin diving, short work hours with minimum pressure and recreation facilities which include a bar for the RA crew (called the Iggy Club for the iguanas on the island), a pool table, card tables, regular movies, plenty of sunbathing and even a player piano (currently out of service).

A little PX-like company store peddles everything from Baby Ruth candy bars to name-brand liquors at fantastically low prices (would you believe Johnny Walker Red Label for \$2.20).

And the Iggy Club is not all. Swan probably sets some kind of world record, saloon-wise, because there is yet another bar on the island, making one joint for every 20 residents. The second bar is called the Swan Island Playboy Club and is located on the federal compound, which is another clearing with a fence around it that lies a bit more than a quarter of a mile from the RA digs. The Playboy is done up in the true island manner, the walls and roof being palm thatch as put together by Caymanian laborers. The latest records blast forth from the club's phonograph and slightly mildewed Playmate

pictures adorn the walls. Both bars are open 24 hours a day and are run on the honor system. You help yourself and drop a quarter in a can.

Which brings us to the most popular sport of all on Swan Island. Drinking, it is called. When work is done there is not a whole lot else to do for a bunch of men who tend to be gregarious, happy-go-lucky types. It is not that the island is populated by a bunch of drunks. Far from it. All no doubt drink in moderation, but with enough consistency that a rattlesnake would die of frustration on the island.

There is another possible pursuit. That would be going stark, raving mad. As the army found out on Pacific islands in World War II, it takes an unusual man to adapt to a life of the same boring weather and the same boring scenery and the same boring faces day after day.

The weather is typically tropic. Our day on Swan (Feb. 7) was in the middle of a cool snap and the temperature got up only to 80°. Usually it hits 85° to 87°. During the course of a whole year the lows almost never drop below 70° and the hottest summer day seldom shows 90°, partly because of constant southwesterly winds which, besides cooling the island, help keep mosquitoes away.

One last recreation is offered by the presence of a complete Collins ham station in an old panel truck parked on the RA compound. Hams from both compounds operate the station any time they desire—and have never been known to fail to get answers on a CQ call. KS4 cards are so rare that one call usually creates a six-deep pile-up.

We had heard that RA personnel and the people from the government compound did not mix but found quite the opposite to be true. Although each outfit has separate buildings the island population seemed to be a large and happy family. In fact, it sometimes is hard to tell which people work where.

Of the two compounds, the federal one is the better looking, having freshly painted white concrete block buildings arranged neatly around a well-manicured hunk of lawn, and it also is thinly populated in comparison with Radio Americas. The FAA staff consists of exactly one man, a nice chap by the name of Carr. The Weather Bureau staff consists of four people, and then there are a couple of laborers around.

The federal people normally do Swan tours

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of two to six months and then are sent to some other station. But Radio Americas people have no definite rotation and some have been on Swan as much as two years. Surprisingly, requests for second tours are not at all unusual.

Radio Americas does not have its own direct radio communications to headquarters in Miami. If an emergency arises they use the FAA's teletype facility. Indeed, while we were in the area the FAA's two-way voice equipment was used to contact the motor vessel Daydream, which calls at the island every couple of weeks with RA supplies that cannot be flown in.

These favors are reciprocated by RA's permitting licensed Weather Bureau and FAA people to use their ham station.

Curiously, while Radio Americas has no FCC license to operate its 50,000-watt broadcast transmitter and 5,000-watt short-wave rig from this little patch of U.S. territory, the ham station is licensed and so are all of its operators. We were told that an FCC broadcast operator's license is not a requirement for getting a technician's job at RA.

After returning northward we contacted the FCC and asked how this monster-size station could operate on American land without a license. Three days later the lad in Washington said there was nothing in the files on the subject, which did not surprise us. Once upon a time that question, asked on the phone, was answered by a man who said, "Government stations don't have to be licensed—no, forget I said that!"

As the day drew on we got to take a motor tour around the perimeter of Swan Island, with most of the trip requiring the vehicle to be driven with the four-wheel drive in low range to plow through the dense foliage. There were parts of the island which were so overgrown that all attempts to cut a road through had failed.

Among the exotic sights along the way were the remains of the United Fruit radio towers, now lying twisted and broken in skeleton-like sections along the beaches.

At the northeast corner of Swan lies Short Cove, a narrow inlet from the sea where a white foamy surf continuously rages. This is the nesting area for the island's booby bird population and is a dandy spot for picking up the ingredients for a big egg breakfast (the man-of-war birds nest only on Little Swan, boobies only on the larger island.)

When it came time to leave late in the

afternoon, one of the Honduran workers from RA asked if he could return to Cayman with us to get some emergency dental work done. He wanted to bring his wife, his brother and two small children along. If he went by boat it would mean a 48-hour sea trip to Cayman after it left Swan. When we agreed to take him we were surprised to learn that many of the people on Swan seemed to have something or other for us to take back.

The result was that before we could take off we stood by and watched our plane loaded with an endless stream of boxes, bags, and crates. Someone even sent along a big batch of frozen wahoo fish, which gave more than a little consternation to the customs inspector on Grand Cayman, who looked with some suspicion on our whole trip to begin with. Leaving with three people in a chartered airliner to mysterious Swan Island was bad enough, but to return that same day with extra passengers, two babies and crates of dubious content, topped off with a bunch of frozen fish, no doubt confirmed his suspicions about what was going on at Swan.

Our suspicions, at any rate, were confirmed. That's where it's happening. If the station we saw on Swan Island *isn't* Radio Americas then someone went to a heck of a lot of trouble just to put us on.

Although no new evidence was obtained (or sought) as to CIA ties, neither did we have reason to alter previous concepts of the station's ownership, motives or financing. Many questions remain unanswered but the biggest one, the one which has caused the most controversy, can be put to rest.

EI was honored at being the first and only publication permitted on Swan and we are grateful to those Radio Americas, Weather Bureau and FAA people who made the visit possible, informative—and enjoyable.

For the benefit of DXers, Radio Americas reception reports should be addressed to 6123 SW 68th St., South Miami, Fla. 33143 (for Swan). The notation after the zip number assures a fast relay to the island from headquarters. RA is an excellent verifier, by the way. The FAA beacon on 407 kc can be picked up in a good part of the States. The ID is *SWA* in Morse, sometimes sent with a short space between the W and A. As is usual with federal stations, this one will verify if you make out the card for them to sign. The address is Box 2014, AMF Branch, Miami, Fla. 33159 (for Swan).

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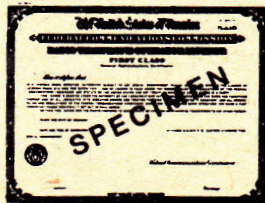
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